Different Dalit women speak differently

Different Dalit Women Speak Differently:

Unravelling, through an Intersectional Lens,

Narratives of Agency and Activism from Everyday Life in Rural Uttar Pradesh

The notion of 'difference' – women's difference from men, differences amongst women, and the very existence of 'différance'[1] – occupies centre-stage in feminist politics the world over. Parallels can be drawn between how the notion has been invoked in relation to African-American women and ex-untouchable women. If Black feminist activists challenged their marginalisation in feminist and civil rights movements, Dalit[2] feminist activists now question their marginalisation in feminist and Dalit movements. Their complaint is identical: that even though poor African-American and ex-untouchable women empirically exist, 'Black woman' was not recognised and 'Dalit women' still are not recognised as a political category in their own right. Black feminist activists created organisations and networks like Combahee River Collective to autonomously represent their interests (Combahee River Collective 1977). Similarly, Dalit feminist activists set up the National Federation of Dalit Women and the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch to 'talk differently' (Guru 1995). Black feminist scholar-activists (e.g. hooks 1981) highlighted how race, class and gender 'add up' to oppress women from African American backgrounds – this insight regarding Black woman's difference later came to be theorised as 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw 1989). Even though there has been little by way of explicit engagement with the concept of 'intersectionality' by scholars writing on ex-untouchable women in India, Dalit feminist scholar-activists (e.g. Dietrich 1992) have

drawn attention to how caste[3], class and gender work together to oppress ex-untouchable women.

What is common in such constructions of difference is that the intersection of social divisions takes place in an additive manner, through the articulation of a single dimension of each division, essentialising Black and Dalit women in particular positions as African-American/ex-untouchable, poor, women (McCall 2005). While such notions of difference and intersectionality have made a valuable contribution by highlighting exclusions and imbuing feminist praxis with a reflexivity it previously lacked, they do not fully capture the complexity and fluidity of contemporary empirical reality. Identity is situationally defined; different political subjects come into being in different contexts at different points of time.

Yuval-Davis (2006) takes this as the basis for a broader interpretation of intersectionality, one that recognises that the different social divisions – race, caste, class, gender, etc. -- are always historically and contextually specific. They have different ontological bases, they are located within different structures of power, and how they intersect, and the social and political processes through which they result in the construction of political categories too are historically and contextually specific. Such an understanding offers us an opportunity to appreciate that *positionality* need not always be conflated with *identity*: i.e., not all ex-untouchable women today would consider themselves 'thrice oppressed' because some of these women are increasingly aspiring middle class women. And *social* divisions need not map onto *political* categories: i.e., not all ex-untouchable women identify themselves as '*Dalit* women'. The Dalit label is a *political* category not to be confused with a fixed, social division.

In the Indian context, this new understanding of identity demands that we interrogate the assumed homogeneity of the political category of 'Dalit women'. In this chapter, I unravel some narratives of agency and activism from the everyday lives of ex-untouchable women in rural Uttar Pradesh (UP)[4] with this aim, and explore whether the very category of 'Dalit women' might be passé as Ciotti has suggested (2010a). These narratives are based on 27 interviews and nine focus group discussions with activist and non-activist ex-untouchable and non-ex-untouchable women, and on other documentation collected during my doctoral research (2004-09), particularly, a case study of a grassroots feminist women's NGO which operates in rural, southern UP, and which I refer to as Vimukt Mahila Samuh (VMS) (Liberated Women's Group).[5]

In a significant departure from much contemporary theorisation on ex-untouchable women, Rege (1998) argued that the category of 'Dalit woman' is multiple, heterogeneous and even contradictory. Her polemical writing invites us to empirically examine the processes by which this category comes into being. I do this by unpacking how the individual narratives of ex-untouchable women employed and mobilised by VMS are interwoven with narratives of collective, 'Dalit identity-related transformations' taking place around them, and how illiterate ex-untouchable women are politicised compared to literate ex-untouchable men[6]. I then intersectionally examine VMS's ex-untouchable women employees' narratives, first in relation to those of the ex-untouchable women whom they mobilise, and then in relation to those of their dominant caste colleagues, to find out if their emergent 'activist' identities imply that they experience a greater solidarity with their dominant caste women colleagues than they do with poor, rural women from their own ex-untouchable community. Through this examination, I offer my reflections on the political category of 'Dalit woman', and how we might theorise ex-untouchable women's condition in contemporary India.

First a few words of introduction about the NGO and about ex-untouchable women's place in its activism are necessary: VMS emerged in 1993 from the national state-sponsored women's education and empowerment programme, Mahila Samakhya (MS), whose most important achievement has been its success at organising large masses of poor rural women. The majority of the poor rural women VMS engages with are Chamars[7]. Whilst Chamars are generally recognised in UP as the most advanced ex-untouchable caste in terms of educational credentials, government jobs and political consciousness (cf. Ciotti 2010a), Chamar women's condition is usually abysmal. Chitrakoot district where VMS predominantly operates ranks near the bottom of national and state averages in terms of income and the sex-ratio (Census of India 2011), and it is well known that criminality and socio-economic inequalities generate caste-class-gender oppression that is experienced in the highest measure by poor Chamar women. VMS's initial focus was on economically empowering poor women by training them as hand-pump mechanics, by organising them into self-help groups and by helping them to set up micro-credit initiatives. It had been contracted to implement World Bank-funded government schemes for women's empowerment. In the late 1990s, VMS began to engage with the issue of gender-based violence, taking up domestic abuse and rape-related cases. By the early 2000s, it was able to negotiate with donors the terms for carrying out projects on issues it identified as central for the women with whom it engaged (Govinda 2009). It launched initiatives to make ex-untouchable women, specifically Chamar women, aware of their rights and of the history of Dalit protest. After the Gujarat riots in 2002, it mobilised around the problem of communalism[8], and set up youth forums to encourage interaction between the different caste and religious communities in the region, specifically caste-Hindus, ex-untouchables and Muslims. These forums involved both

Hindu and Muslim adolescent girls and boys, and through them hoped to reach out to women and men from these communities.

In the early 2000s, VMS undertook an important review of its organisational work. This involved taking stock of the initiatives it had launched, whom it mobilised and the strategies it employed for doing so since its inception. It resulted in a restructuring of the organisation's activist work into three main units: a community empowerment unit, which consisted of its work with self-help groups and making ex-untouchable women aware of their 'Dalit' identity; a human rights unit, which included its work on gender-based violence and on communal harmony; and a natural resource management unit, which included its women hand-pump mechanics programme. In order to effectively raise awareness about their 'Dalit identity' among the ex-untouchable women whom VMS mobilised and to carry out work on caste/religious harmony, by mobilising Muslims, it was decided at the review that henceforth the organisation would only hire employees from ex-untouchable and Muslim backgrounds. Towards the end of my fieldwork in 2006, VMS was active in 85 villages in Chitrakoot district and in Banda district's town areas, and out of its 30 employees, that is those on the staff roll, receiving a proper salary and occupying posts ranging from directors and coordinators to facilitators and fieldworkers, about a third each were ex-untouchables, Muslims and dominant Hindu castes[9]. Around four-fifth of them were women. In addition to these employees, the organisation benefitted from the support of 'volunteers', that is, local women and men whom it counted on to carry out its bidding in their own villages. Since VMS primarily engaged with Chamar women, most of these volunteers too were Chamar women.[10] All volunteers were paid a small honorarium for their contribution.

The organisational leadership consisted of two middle class, urban, educated women: one an upper-caste Hindu (who was the founder-leader, and referred to as '*badi didi*', 'big sister') and another, a Muslim. Both, for some years now, had been living outside of Chitrakoot and Banda and made visits to oversee the running of the organisation. A second rung of leaders, holding the post of coordinators, was being groomed to run the day-to-day activities. This rung of leaders was solely from caste-Hindu background. I have discussed elsewhere (Govinda 2009) how the absence of male and female employees from the ex-untouchable castes from the second rung of leadership positions was a result of their lack of the required level of educational qualifications, and how VMS was different from other local NGOs in that its leadership was conscious of this issue and consistently encouraged the ex-untouchable employees in their efforts to acquire these qualifications and to climb up the organisational hierarchy.

Exploring intersections of the collective and the subjective

Collective identity narratives often act as resources for individual identity formation (Yuval-Davis 2006). Hence, VMS's ex-untouchable women employees' individual identity narratives need to be examined in the context of broader, more collective, 'Dalit' identity-related transformations. One such collective identity narrative has to do with VMS raising the awareness of ex-untouchable women regarding their identity as 'Dalit women', as Sonam's narrative reveals. Sonam, a woman of Kori[11] caste, in her mid-20s, worked for VMS as a full-time paralegal and lived in town. She observed:

> In the 1990s, I was working at MS as a teacher. I moved to VMS in the early 2000s when MSK[12] shut down... When I joined here, I didn't know what 'Dalit' meant. Until then, I only knew: I'm Harijan... I'm a Kori, not 'I'm a Dalit'.

> Then Sanjana *didi* (sister) got me involved with DAG. When I went for their first meeting, I was told that I'd be the regional coordinator. I was very nervous. I told them, 'I'll do the work but don't give me the position.' But gradually I realised that as a Dalit woman I should understand my issues, I should put forward what Dalit women have to say. Now whenever I hear about a Dalit incident [atrocity], I immediately go there, I plan actions [in response]... The biggest change in me happened when I had to compere the 2004 Dalit Women's Public Hearing in Lucknow. Until then, I could do any job, but I couldn't speak in public. But after that event, I got to hear that I'd done a good job as a compere.... Through this I've got recognition too.
>
> Now, my thinking and the organisation's thinking is the same.... In these last three to four years, this new phase has begun for me: 'Dalit, Dalit, Dalit'.... We had a lot of discussion on the word 'Harijan'. Gandhi's thinking was that the Harijans came from Hari's mouth. But today Dalits oppose this way of thinking. Are not other people Hari's *jan* (God's people) too? (Field notes, 10 August 2005)

The organisation ran workshops for all its employees on caste identity and caste-based discrimination (and how these affect ex-untouchable women), and also on the history of Dalit protest. In 2004, it set up the Dalit Mahila Samiti (the Dalit Women's Association -- the DWA), a federal structure which brought together 1200 self-help group members. There was also a conscious shift in discourse; on VMS founder-leader Sanjana Gupta's own admission the organisation went from employing 'SC' and 'Harijan' to 'Dalit' when referring to ex-untouchables (field notes, 18-21 September 2006). The influence of these organisational transformations on Sonam's subjectivity is particularly evident in the fact that when she first joined VMS she did not even know what 'Dalit' meant, whereas she is now deeply embedded in Dalit activism.

In spite of the burgeoning role of Dalit advocacy groups and of activist networks from the 1990s onwards in consciousness-raising among ex-untouchables and in making their voices heard in regional, national and international forums (Lerche 2008), far more attention has been paid to the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)-led ex-untouchable assertion than to these NGOs and networks in UP (Jaffrelot 2003; Narayan 2006; Pai 2002). Several of these Dalit groups and networks prefer to adopt a *socio-cultural approach* to Dalit emancipation, one which is distinctly outside the sphere of *electoral* politics. They believe in the Ambedkarite ideal of *a social revolution preceding a political revolution*, and devote themselves to protest politics, protection and promotion of interests of ex-untouchable government employees and, in some cases, religious conversion (Jaoul 2007). They tend to be critical of BSP's opportunism and distinguish themselves from BSP-led Dalit electoral politics in the state. Like most Dalit social activism elsewhere in the country (Rao 2003), these advocacy groups and networks do *not* appear to have a distinctly feminist agenda.[13] However, some, like the Dynamic Action Group (DAG), which was formed in 1998 and consists of thirty Dalit organisations primarily led by male activists, have sought to mobilise ex-untouchable women around issues like land rights and caste- and gender-based violence. The public hearing on violence against ex-untouchable women that DAG organised with support from organisations like VMS, and that Sonam compered is a case in point. It was decided that since the hearing was intended for ex-untouchable women, it should be conducted by them. Sonam was identified as one such compere. Her involvement with DAG, albeit facilitated by VMS, contributed significantly to her becoming conscious both of her identity as a Dalit woman and of her responsibilities as a Dalit woman activist.[14]

Sonam's views resonate with DAG's and BSP's on the use of 'Harijan'. Meaning 'God's people', the term, originally coined by the seventeenth century Gujarati poet Narsi Mehta to denote 'untouchables', was popularised by M.K. Gandhi (who was a caste-Hindu). Gandhi, it is claimed, preferred to use a Hindu name for God (Hari) because he argued that the ex-untouchables or 'Hari's people' should be *included* within the caste society from which they had been excluded. His attempts to end untouchability have therefore been criticised for their 'deradicalisation' of the caste question (Jaoul 2013: 174). Mouthing anti-Gandhi propaganda, the BSP leader, Mayawati, and other Dalit politicos and Dalit activists in UP have rejected the term 'Harijan' because they see it as curtailing the political agency of ex-untouchables (see Singh 2010). Sonam's simultaneous *rejection of 'Harijan' identity and espousal of 'Dalit' identity* are thus not merely evidence of her toeing VMS's official line, but *are political actions that are informed by both broader, collective identity narratives as well as contemporary political changes in UP*.

In Chuniya's narrative below, the roles that VMS, DWA, and the BSP's rise to power have played in the formation of ex-untouchable women's subjectivity as 'Dalit women' are made more explicit. Chuniya was a woman of Chamar caste, in her early 40s, and living in a village with a significant VMS presence. She was an elected DWA leader who received a small honorarium from VMS for her contribution to its work. She observed:

> I am the DWA president, and a member of VMS.[15] I run the self-help group in my hamlet... I've never been to school. I was married at 12. My husband works as a labourer. I'm a mother of five.... Earlier, I was involved only in housework … now I have to look after the household *and* the society… Earlier, as daughters-in-law we were weak in our homes, as members of Dalit families we were weak in society, we

didn't have any property in our name…we blindly followed custom but now we understand that like men, we have rights… Since I've joined the group, I've got an identity, recognition, and information about each and everything… people know me by my name. Today, men have fear because we have strength. We're organised. We've got confidence. Earlier, no one knew us. Now, if there's a problem in the village, it's immediately brought to us.

Earlier, we didn't know about *Baba saheb* (Ambedkar).... Things have changed since we started celebrating Jayanti (Ambedkar's birth anniversary). Earlier, we only knew about Congress, BJP... But now BSP has really taken off. Now in our group (read: VMS-supported self-help group), association (DWA), party (BSP)…from every quarter we've got information about '*Jai Bheem*' (Hail Bheem)[16]…. so history has been revealed to us. But the main [source] was VMS… Savitribai's [Savitribai Phule's] slogan, *Baba saheb's* slogan, the organisation has told us everything about these [great leaders] ... The day the Dalit fair happened, a big photo of *Baba saheb* was placed there. We were given a badge [with the Phules' picture]. That day, *badi didi* ('big sister', a term of respect the women use for VMS's founder-leader) got everyone to shout '*Jai Bheem*'.... In a literal sense, we are 'Dalit' (meaning 'oppressed' – here she crouched in a foetal position) but when we walk as the Dalit Mahila Samiti, we say we are the *Dalit* Mahila Samiti (Dalit Women's Association) (emphasising 'Dalit' – here she raised her hands to signify victorious celebration) (Field notes, 25 November 2005, 1-19 August 2006).

The BSP has not improved ordinary ex-untouchables' economic position in UP (see Mehrotra, this volume) but it has benefitted them at the symbolic and political levels (Kohli 2001). Mayawati, having become the first ex-untouchable Chief Minister of UP, represents a

powerful role model for them (Ciotti 2009). Chuniya's narrative reveals how the BSP's growing prominence has meant that today there is far more information available to ex-untouchables in the rural public sphere about Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and also about the history of Dalit protest. This new knowledge has contributed to Chuniya's proud new identity as a Dalit community member.

Through her association with VMS this knowledge has informed the struggles she spearheads as a 'Dalit woman'. Well aware that *women from every ex-untouchable caste practise untouchability against every other ex-untouchable caste that is below their own*, VMS has tried to foster unity among them, as well as a sense of their collective identity as 'Dalit women'. It has done so through the DWA, combining local cultural practices – including oath-taking, songs, street theatre performances and village fairs – with symbols, icons and identification rituals drawn from the history of Dalit protests in both UP and Maharashtra. In 2006, VMS organised a Dalit fair where the women were asked to take an oath whereby they promised to not practise untouchability amongst themselves. They sang songs and chanted slogans celebrating Ambedkar's contribution to the Dalit cause. They were made aware of the inspiring work of Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule[17] through a street-theatre performance, and given badges, bearing the Phules' picture. Chuniya refers to these slogans, songs, oaths and the fair. Her remarks show the strong impression made by VMS's use of Ambedkarite iconography and VMS's use of the Phules as exemplary pan-Dalit reformers, in order to promote a sense of collective identity among its ex-untouchable women members. Chuniya shows an understanding of both the literal meaning of the term 'Dalit' as well as its politicised use.[18] ''Dalit' in Sanskrit is derived from... *dal*, which means amputated... destroyed or crushed' (Narayan 2006: 34). The term was politicised by the Dalit Panthers of India in Maharashtra in the 1960s, and was inspired by the Black Panther movement in the

United States. The Dalit Panthers employed the term in order to invert the symbolic markers of their oppression and to signify their pride in their Dalit self-identity. Ex-untouchables who organised themselves elsewhere in India borrowed the term too (Gorringe 2005; Pai 2002). VMS started using it in the early 2000s.

There are resonances in the repertoires of rituals, symbols and icons employed by VMS and the BSP in their mobilizations of ex-untouchables in UP. However, when I examined the relative importance of the BSP and of VMS in the politicisation of these ex-untouchable women (Govinda 2008) I found that ex-untouchable women are politicised very differently from ex-untouchable men in the areas where VMS operates. One reason for this is that the BSP very largely mobilises *literate* ex-untouchables, most of whom are *men* while VMS mobilises ex-untouchable women, most of whom are illiterate.[19] A conversation with Chuniya illustrates this. She commented:

> The party (BSP) is taking along those who are literate. Men are literate. Women are not. So it is taking with it the men. The men come into the party, join it, become politicians. VMS is mobilising illiterate women. So, in the beginning there was MS. Some women studied there.[20] Having studied, they came forward a bit. Then they formed collectives in villages. Then more women joined the collectives. Now the Association's (DWA's) work is taking place. So through this we have got great strength.

Chuniya's observations highlight the importance ex-untouchables -- *especially* Chamars -- attribute to formal education in their struggle to gain political awareness and emancipation – an important point that Ciotti (2006) makes about ex-untouchables in eastern UP. They also

show that ex-untouchable women have become literate (or even educated) and politically aware through very different channels from those used by men. Patriarchal norms prevent rural girls and rural, including ex-untouchable girls and women, from receiving (leave alone completing) formal education. These norms also come in the way of rural ex-untouchable women actively participating in the BSP's party political activities which are usually organised in male-controlled public spaces that are removed from women's daily lives, and at times when women are preoccupied with their domestic responsibilities (Gorringe 2005). MS and VMS, in sharp contrast, offer them female *public* spaces, notably the DWA, which are embedded in these women's own localities and focused on addressing their concerns.

Do different Dalit women speak differently?

Though the subjectivities of VMS-associated ex-untouchable women – both employees and members – have been politicised by collective, Dalit identity-related transformations in ways that are very different from the politicisation of ex-untouchable men this does not imply that they constitute a single political category, namely 'Dalit women'. Ex-untouchable women employees of VMS have more education than the ex-untouchable women they mobilise. Their self-identity as 'activist Dalit women' is based on their consciousness of the political significance of the term 'Dalit', of the history of Dalit protest and of their (activist) responsibility towards other ex-untouchable women, resulting from their association with VMS. This has contributed to the creation of a significant difference between the ex-untouchable women employees of VMS and the ex-untouchable women they mobilise. The two contrasting narratives below reveal this growing difference. Sunita, a Chamar woman in her mid-30s, was a full-time facilitator at VMS and lived in town. She said:

> I've been working here for twelve or thirteen years. I began as a school teacher, then moved to MS's rural literacy centres, and later taught at MSK in town. In early 2000s, I joined VMS. After joining, I did BA, a sewing course, and even a computer course. This year, I've passed the BEd entrance exam. I used to look after the self-help groups. Now, I'm involved in community empowerment. When I joined VMS, I didn't know what 'Dalit' meant. I didn't know that the myths had stories about Dalit characters like Ekalavya and Gargi.... and I didn't know about the history of Dalit protest. I didn't know that people like Savitribai Phule had struggled against the age-old practice of oppressing Dalit women and had been successful. When I came to know all this, I felt that I could do this too. As a Dalit, I feel good that I'm working for my own community's women (Field notes, 8 August 2005).

Sunita's views offer a striking contrast to those of Sukhdaiya (below), an illiterate Chamar woman in her mid-50s, who lived in a village with an important VMS presence,

> What can I tell you? I'm illiterate.... I don't really like the word 'Dalit' at all. Initially, I used to keep saying 'Daridru' ('downtrodden') instead of 'Dalit'. It was especially embarrassing for the VMS leaders when I went on an exposure visit to Maharashtra. *Badi didi* (the VMS founder-leader) told off the *didi* ('sister', VMS staff member) accompanying us, for not having taught us how to pronounce 'Dalit' correctly.... I think the Association should be called Anusuchit Jati Mahila Samiti (Scheduled Caste Women's Association). Anusuchit Jati is the official name for our kind of people. But if, by calling ourselves 'Dalit', we find that people offer us chairs to sit on and give us respect, then we can certainly call ourselves 'Dalit'! (Field notes, 25 November 2005; 19 August 2006).

In contrast to Sunita, who like her ex-untouchable women colleagues, is literate, and has pursued further studies[21] after joining VMS, Sukhdaiya represents the majority of illiterate ex-untouchable women whom the organisation mobilises. She neither likes the term 'Dalit' nor owns it in the way that VMS's ex-untouchable women employees do. Her preference for 'SC', and her mispronouncing of 'Dalit' as '*Daridru*'[22], which shows her lack of familiarity with the term, are true of ex-untouchables generally in contemporary UP (Chandra 2004; Ciotti 2010a). Her remark, that ex-untouchable women would gladly call themselves 'Dalit' if this meant that doing so improved their treatment in society, indicates that she considers both the term and the very notion of 'Dalit' identity to be external impositions, and that the use of the Dalit label is governed by an instrumentalist logic.[23]

The material and performative aspects of the differences between VMS's ex-untouchable women employees and the rural ex-untouchable women whom they mobilised suggest that the former's better education and new self-identity as 'activist Dalit women' enabled them to gain a new *class* identity. VMS operated through employees like Sunita who were on its 'staff rolls'. They were paid a monthly salary and were viewed as being far superior to the 'volunteers', who were local women and men who worked in their own villages and received a small honorarium. DWA leaders like Chuniya and Sukhdaiya fell in the latter category. This hierarchy between professionals and volunteers, so typical of 'NGO-style' activism, has been well-documented (Sharma 2006). *The growing class differences* amongst *ex-untouchable women where VMS operates challenge the assumed homogeneity of the political category of 'Dalit woman'*.

These class differences are a relatively new development, with the ex-untouchable women employees still finding their way when negotiating their new public-professional identity as 'activist Dalit women' – and rejecting their 'inherited' identity as poor, 'ordinary', Chamar or Kori women, as Rani's narrative below illustrates. She was a married Chamar woman in her late-20s and worked as a VMS fieldworker:

> My thinking has been shaped by what I learnt at VMS. The way I can speak today, I couldn't before... I'd shudder even if someone spoke to me in my marital home. Now, I can speak confidently even in front of a hundred people. I can even speak to a big official. Now I wear a *salwar* suit (pants and long shirt) even in my marital home.... and I no longer do *ghunghat* (veiling)...
>
> Our [marital] home is very far from town, and local transport is not easily available. This month, I haven't been home for more than ten days. But if I wasn't earning, we wouldn't be able to send our children to a good school. In my marital home, everyone is a labourer. Because I earn, I have a say.
>
> But there are things that haven't changed. For instance, we [read: her mother-in-law, her co-sister and herself] are long acquainted with the *jamadar* (sweeper) who comes to pick up the trash, and we even treat her with respect, but we can't touch her. One day, I happened to take a carrot from her hand, and I was asked to bathe again. Now my children are also picking up these bad habits! (Field notes, 25 August 2006).

Rani's narrative is replete with references to 'voice' and 'power', both of which are central to the construction of agency and subjectivity (Kabeer 2013). Her public-professional identity has undoubtedly 'liberated' her from some of the limitations imposed on her by patriarchal norms. This has set her apart from the women in her family. Her well-paid job means that she

is heard at home. Her choice of modern attire, part of performing her new identity of 'activist woman', sets her further apart from her female relatives. The *salwar* suit is the preferred attire of both VMS's younger ex-untouchable *and* higher caste women employees. This is because the sari is seen as somewhat old-fashioned – it is typically worn by married women, and is not as comfortable as the sari for travelling in between home, office and village. So the salwar suit has become identified as 'activist attire', and is worn even at home. Though Rani does not mention the cotton sling bag she carries while at work, this too has becoml,e part of activist attire, so that the villagers refer to VMS's women employees as '*jholawali*' ('cotton sling-bag-carrying women').

In true feminist style, VMS's ex-untouchable women employees attempt to honour their political commitments as 'activist Dalit women' in their personal lives too. However, this is not easily done. In Rani's case, her mother-in-law's and sister-in-law's more conventional ideas that Chamars ought to practise untouchability towards Jamadars,[24] who are lower than them in the hierarchy of the Dalit castes, sit ill with her political commitment to fight untouchability. Her earning capacity and exposure to education's merits, resulting from her association with VMS, have led her to aspire for a good education for her children. But this means that she must depend on her marital family, whose casteist behaviour goes against her political beliefs, to look after her children while she is at work. She remains trapped in this dilemma.

Ciotti (2009; 2010a; 2010b) has consistently made the crucial argument that the category of 'Dalit women' is becoming increasingly fragmented. She writes about the growing social distance between urban ex-untouchable women, like middle-class BSP women activists, whom she calls 'bourgeois women' and ex-untouchable rural women

labourers, 'rowdy and uncultured', who are seen by higher class ex-untouchable women as 'the half-naked ones'. The emerging class differences between VMS's ex-untouchable women employees and the ex-untouchable women with whom they work are not yet as stark as those between Ciotti's BSP women and her labouring women but they are still palpable. However, there are crucial differences between the educated, aspiring-to-middle class and middle-class ex-untouchable women whom Ciotti and I describe in these two UP contexts. Unlike Ciotti's BSP women who operate in urban and peri-urban areas VMS's ex-untouchable women employees are either rural or first generation urban migrants. Further, Ciotti's BSP women *reject the Dalit label* while VMS's ex-untouchable women employees proudly identify themselves as 'activist Dalit women'. Both are concerned with ex-untouchable women's issues but, unlike the BSP women, the VMS Dalit activists are distinctly feminist in their approach. Finally, and most importantly, class separates them. The relatively well-off middle-class BSP women started their political activities as 'housewives' who were 'liberated from paid work' – they were financially dependent on and were encouraged by their white-collar husbands, who were active BSP members, to devote their 'free' time to BSP activism (Ciotti 2010a). VMS's ex-untouchable women employees,[25] on the contrary, got involved in VMS's activism because they were poor women who needed jobs in order to support themselves and their children.[26]

Is the political category of 'Dalit women' passé?

Ex-untouchable women's politicisation and moving up the social hierarchy through different channels gives us reason to argue that *the political category of 'Dalit women' is, indeed, multiple, heterogeneous and even contradictory*, in the ways Rege characterised it. But are these developments adequate to make a case for 'post-Dalit' identities? Do VMS's ex-untouchable women employees' upward mobility and self-identification as activist women

imply that they experience a greater solidarity with their higher caste women colleagues than they do with poor, ex-untouchable women? VMS's ex-untouchable and higher caste women employees' sense of solidarity with each other comes not only from the performance of their activist identity in 'the field' but also from having similar reasons for joining the organisation and from facing similar challenges. Reema, a Chamar woman in her late-20s, was a VMS fieldworker and lived in town. She said:

> I'm divorced... and self-dependent. I've had my own house built in town, and live there with my four children. I was married at 13. At 15, I had my first child. I underwent a lot of abuse: my husband used to drink, gamble and beat me up. But I couldn't find the courage to leave him… He wouldn't even give me money for food. Then I thought why not get a job somewhere and feed my children. That is how I started working at VMS (Field notes, 10 August 2005).

Urmi, a Yadav[27] woman in her late-20s, was a VMS fieldworker living in town. Like Reema, she had been a child bride:

> I was 15 when I got married... Everyone in my marital home was illiterate. They didn't want me to get a job. I faced lot of harassment there. Once I quarrelled and came away to live with my parents… I'd heard that this organization [VMS] isn't good, the women working here aren't good but I needed work. So I joined.… Relations with my marital home are cut now.... I've taken a room on rent and live there [in town]. I have two small children… From this job I manage monthly expenses....I've now got the confidence that I'll be able to solve any problem that I

might face… I feel this organization has become everything to me: father, mother, brother, sister, everything (Field notes, 25 August 2006).

The shocking fact is that, even today, the *majority* of marriages in UP are child marriages (54.9%). This illegal practice remains widespread across all communities but its incidence is highest among the poor (UNICEF 2011). Child marriage, and the male control and violence accompanying it, have to do with patriarchy. Girls tend to be married off at an early age to ensure that their virginity is intact at the time of their wedding. But even after marriage their family members are not comfortable with their going out unaccompanied – whether to pursue education or to do paid work. This is because their sexuality, 'tamed' by their husbands, embodies 'family honour', and this 'honour' would be less amenable to control were they to go out of sight (Chakravarti 2003).

Reema's and Urmi's cases are typical examples of child marriage, and in no way exceptional at VMS. Many of VMS's women employees, who had been married as children, were experiencing marital discord or were separated or divorced. Several of them had originally contacted VMS to seek help with their own domestic abuse cases, and had subsequently joined VMS as activists. In a society where hetero-patriarchal families are the norm and where women are expected to marry and live with their husbands, VMS provides the possibility of an alternative life-style to those women who can no longer conform or who are struggling to challenge social norms. The general population is conservative, however, and therefore feels threatened by VMS's feminist agenda, which is perceived as being identical with that of a woman who is considered a '*ghar phodu*' ('home breaker'). It is significant that single women employees predominate at VMS. These are women who were previously married but are now separated or divorced, or, in very rare cases, were never

married, and are now living apart from their natal and marital homes. These single women employees are automatically branded as 'sexually loose' by the deeply patriarchal society they live in. Backlashes of this kind against newly assertive and empowered women, especially activist women, are common in India (see Anandhi, Gorringe, Guerin and Kumar, Still, this volume) and elsewhere (Faludi 1992). This social intimidation and disapproval furthers a limited sense of solidarity between VMS's single ex-untouchable and higher caste women employees.

However, the narratives of VMS's ex-untouchable women employees, namely, Sonam, Sunita and Reema below shed light on caste politics within the organisation suggesting that their upward mobility and their solidarity with higher caste women colleagues like Urmi do not mean that the political category of 'Dalit women' has become redundant. Even though class differences between VMS's higher caste women employees and ex-untouchable women employees are not always significant, a higher *caste* identity still gives greater confidence and authority. To quote Sonam,

> There is a feeling of inferiority among the Dalit women employees, which isn't there in the caste-Hindu women. Even today if I say something to someone, I say it with a lot of politeness. But the activists who are from Brahmin families speak with such authority!

Sunita's observations below suggest that ex-untouchable employees continue to be conscious of their caste identities at work and also that their sense of inferiority comes from the deep-seated casteist attitudes and stereotyping that prevail, *even at VMS*:

> There is no overt caste-based discrimination. But... when there is a discussion in the office about the organisation's work with the Dalit community sometimes there are comments that 'Dalits are like this' or 'Dalits act like that'. This really bothers me. The casteist stereotypes about Dalits are still there.... Dalit identity is [still] a very big issue. In the past, I never used to think about these things, but now I do.

In other NGOs working with women, even self-proclaimed feminist NGOs, in India, the issue of caste-based discrimination by higher caste employees towards ex-untouchable employees is rarely addressed; efforts are usually made to keep the issue of casteism within the NGO under wraps because of the unease of the NGO leaders, who are usually from urban, middle class, higher caste backgrounds, and because ex-untouchable employees hesitate to complain about casteism for fear of being fired (Anupamlata et al. 2006). In some NGOs, as in those studied by Guerin and Kumar (this volume), higher caste employees go to the extent of blatantly practising caste-based discrimination towards their colleagues from ex-untouchable castes. In stark contrast to this trend, Reema's narrative below indicates that, to its credit, VMS's work to raise awareness about caste-based discrimination includes allowing its ex-untouchable women employees to vigorously question the organisation's own caste politics:

> If we say we work with Dalit women then we should be employing them too! But previously in the staff, there were just the two or three of us.... That kind of discrimination takes place in the village, but we ourselves are doing it here in the organisation... Only *baniya* (middle caste Hindus) are employed in VMS's catering service. Why is this? Are there no Chamar or Jamadar women who can cook? We've recently created the rule that once a week the Jamadar woman who cleans the office toilet will get the day off and a staff member will clean it instead. But can things be

> set right by one of us cleaning the toilet weekly? Why don't we instead ask the Jamadar woman *to cook* for us in our catering service? But we don't eat what they've touched or even accept water from their hands.... I argue about these issues with everyone, even the founder-leader. We go from village to village, talking about change, but there should be change in our own office too!

During my fieldwork, VMS implemented decisions from the organisational review it undertook in the early 2000s, including decisions to raise awareness about ex-untouchable women's identity and rights as 'Dalit women', and to employ more ex-untouchable women. In 2005 during my first round of fieldwork, there were no ex-untouchable women employed in the catering service that VMS had run since the mid-1990s.[28] VMS' ex-untouchable employees like Reema felt that this reflected poorly on the organisation as it was not practising what it preached. They also dismissed the policy requiring staff members to clean the office toilet once weekly as a token gesture. But by the time I returned in 2006, for my second round of fieldwork, VMS had appointed a Jamadar woman to the catering service, and had employed more ex-untouchable women, raising their number to nearly a third of VMS's staff.

Nonetheless, solidarity between the ex-untouchable women employees and their higher caste women colleagues was not enough to mitigate the caste differences between them, as was evident from their very different career aspirations.[29] To quote higher caste VMS employee, Urmi,

> I've bought a plot of land... One day, I'll build a house on it. I chose the plot in such a way that a four-wheeler can be parked outside the house. I dream of running my own

> women's NGO from there. I've even begun looking into the paperwork for getting an FCRA[30] permit.

The idea that she could herself become the organisation leader was an attractive one for Urmi and formed the underlying motivation behind her wanting to set up her own women's organisation. Given her lesser educational qualifications in comparison to the first rung of leadership at VMS, it was unlikely that she would ever rise to become the organisation leader there. While Urmi dreamt of setting up her own women's organisation, Bela had already done so. Bela was a Brahmin woman in her mid-30s who lived in town and had formerly been a VMS coordinator. Speaking about the genesis of her NGO, she said:

> If we want our independent identity as women... then we have to build a different world.... When this question started to crop up at work I felt that I should do something…. That is how my organisation came into being (Field notes, 22 August 2006).

Bela was not comfortable with the fact that two of the handful of male employees at VMS occupied positions in the second rung of leadership like she did. Her wanting to work in an all-women's organisation where leadership positions are solely occupied by women was the driving force behind her wanting to set up a women's organisation of her own. It is not unusual for VMS employees to try to create an identity of their own and to imagine a future independent of VMS. But unlike higher caste women employees, who – either out of an awareness that whilst they are likely to thrive in the NGO sector, they are unlikely to ascend in VMS's organisational hierarchy or out of dissatisfaction with VMS's internal gender politics – aspire to run their own women's organisations, ex-untouchable women employees

focus on trying to enter local electoral politics, encouraged by the seats reserved for ex-untouchable women at the panchayat level (village-level governing body). Reflecting on her motivation and her experience of contesting village-level elections, Ramkali, who was in her late-40s, from the Chamar caste, and employed as a fieldworker at VMS, had said:

> The organisation (VMS) is there, of course, and it is doing good work. But to access government schemes for village development, and to influence the different authorities in favour of one's community, one needs power, political power…. I've contested village-level elections twice. If I was not working here I'd not even have had information about it… In my community, I was told, 'You're Dalit, you're from amongst us, we'll be able to tell you our problem and you'll get it solved.' My VMS colleagues came in their individual capacities to campaign for me.[31] The second time I stood, I had to go into hiding two days before the voting. The dacoits (paid thugs) were pressurising me to withdraw. They came to beat up my family.… But I'm determined to stand again! (field notes, 1-25 August 2006).

Comparing Ramkali's observations with Urmi's and Bela's brings to mind Chatterjee's (1998; 2001) constructs of 'civil society' and 'political society', where he uses 'political society' to refer to the institutions and actors which mediate the relationships between associational politics and the state. Although higher caste Urmi and Bela aspire to create identities independent of VMS, they think solely in terms of gender politics and are contented to remain engaged in civil society. The fact that they do not mention their caste identities is likely to be because their higher caste positions confer many privileges (Krishna 2011). In contrast, the centrality of caste identity in Ramkali's narrative is evident. The first time she contested elections, she stood for a panchayat seat reserved for ex-untouchable

women. For women like Ramkali, capturing political power at panchayat level can bring about major changes in their community's condition. This is something that their involvement in social activism through women's NGOs is unlikely to achieve.

Ramkali's words reflect her internalisation of Ambedkar's and BSP founder-leader Kanshi Ram's powerful messages about the need to 'educate, agitate, organise' and to – above all -- capture political power to transform their circumstances (Pai 2002). Ex-untouchables like her view the state as having the power and the resources to improve their community's condition. After all, the state has granted them special privileges, including reservations in the legislatures at central and state levels and in public sector jobs. Ramkali and her fellow ex-untouchables (in her view) must seek the most effective way of getting the state to work in their interest -- and this they can only do if they control the panchayat, which would put them in control of local power politics. Further, given the importance of patronage in panchayat politics (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004), Ramkali is quite right to focus her aspirations on capturing political office.

Closely reading not only Ramkali's but also Bela's and Urmi's narratives indicates that their association with VMS has simultaneously enabled them to gain exposure to public life, information about their rights, and confidence that they can articulate the concerns of those they seek to mobilise and represent, *and* made them aware of the limits of what they can achieve whilst remaining associated with VMS. Their involvement in workshops and street theatre campaigns, organised by VMS on panchayat elections, women's rights, and Dalit identity, is likely to have played an important role in deepening their political consciousness. Bela's reference to the FCRA permit illustrates how her work at VMS made

her aware of the nitty-gritty of running a women's NGO. Ramkali's role as a VMS fieldworker helped her to gain her community's trust.

However, unlike the cases of higher caste Bela and Urmi, Ramkali's ex-untouchable caste identity and her association with VMS have proved to be double-edged: if these motivated and enabled her to contest the local elections, they were also the very reason why her family was subjected to violence and she lost the election. The dominant caste Hindus, namely Brahmins in the village, who had BJP backing, had been angered by the possibility of an ex-untouchable woman winning the local elections. They knew that if she got elected they would be unable to manipulate her, because of her close association with VMS, an NGO with a clean image. They had therefore paid local gangsters to beat her up. Not finding her, they had badly beaten up her husband and sons instead. This violence was meant as a warning to other ex-untouchables of what would befall them if they were to vote for her. In the end, in spite of their initial support, none of them dared to cast their votes in Ramkali's favour and she lost. *As ex-untouchables steadily gain more upward mobility and assert themselves politically, such violent attempts to intimidate them are becoming more common* – a fact that several other contributors to this volume also acknowledge (see Anandhi, Gorringe, Guerin and Kumar, Still, Teltumbde, this volume; see also Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998).

Ramkali's experience and Sunita's comments below both confirm that in southern UP elections are won on the basis of caste and kinship politics rather than on feminist agendas, once more highlighting the centrality of caste identity in the personal and professional lives of VMS's ex-untouchable women employees:

> This year I got elected as a ward member. My father is a school master, and my sister-in-law was a neighbouring ward member.... I used these connections when I was canvassing for votes.... If at the time of the elections one puts one's thinking (feminist views) on the backburner and instead goes along with the electoral mood then maybe one will win. And, after winning, if one puts forward one's (feminist) thinking then maybe it'll be received positively. This is politics.... Of course, people knew about my organisational affiliation (with VMS)... but I chose not to highlight it.

Ramkali and Sunita may contest elections in the hope of acceding to political office even though this is neither easy nor straightforward for ex-untouchable women like them, but even when they do manage to win, there is no guarantee that they will be treated any better by the dominant castes or that they will be able to actually wield power given the clout the latter retain even today in institutions of local governance (see Anandhi, this volume). The continuing centrality of caste in these women's lives in these ways leads me to conclude that the political category of 'Dalit women' remains valid to characterise their condition.

Conclusion: A Work in Progress

Scholarship on Dalit assertion in UP has focused on the power the BSP has garnered and on its cultural and political strategies for mobilising ex-untouchables (Jaffrelot 2003; Narayan 2006; Pai 2002).However, in this chapter I have instead examined the narratives of ex-untouchable women who stand on the cusp of Dalit social activism as well as Dalit electoral politics. Whilst the BSP's role is undeniably significant in their narratives, it is only one among multiple influences on their subjectivity. My use of intersectionality as a heuristic device with which to examine their narratives has shown that while illiterate ex-untouchable women are politicised by women's NGOs like VMS literate ex-untouchable men are

politicised very differently, as they are directly politicised by the BSP. I have also shown here how ex-untouchable women activists are increasingly differentiated from ordinary ex-untouchable women. But *all* ex-untouchable women see themselves as discriminated against by dominant caste women.

Clearly, educated ex-untouchable women VMS activists *do* reject being stereotyped as poor helpless ex-untouchable women. However, they *do not* reject the notion of a 'Dalit' identity. Further, while the majority of poor ex-untouchable women can still be characterised as 'thrice oppressed' – by oppressive and exploitative hierarchies of caste, class and gender – VMS's Dalit women activists do not fall into this category. My research indicates that there are, at least, two significantly different types of educated, assertive and agentive ex-untouchable women emerging in urban and rural UP. On the one hand Ciotti's work shows us middle-class BSP women activists who are 'housewives' who devote their spare time to politics and who reject 'Dalit' identity for themselves (2010a). But, in contradistinction from Ciotti, my findings on lower-income, (single) full-time NGO activist women reveal that they wholeheartedly endorse their new 'Dalit' identities.

Further, the levels of political consciousness *among ex-untouchable women* in the state vary greatly. At least three major strands can be discerned: (1) there are those for whom the Dalit label has no meaning because they remain removed from Dalit electoral/ associational politics due to poverty (2a) there are those who work as and identify as *activist* Dalit women as well as (2b) those poor women who are *not* activists but yet identify as Dalit women, and (3) there are those better-off women (researched by Ciotti) who *reject* the Dalit label. This remarkable diversity among ex-untouchable women in UP leads us to go beyond

Guru's thesis (1995) that 'Dalit women speak differently', to instead acknowledge that *different* Dalit women speak *differently*.

Their acquisition of education combined with their employment in VMS has changed activist ex-untouchable women and contributed to the beginnings of a *class* difference between them and the rural ex-untouchable women whom they mobilise. In the performance and negotiation of their new identities as 'activist women', this minority of ex-untouchable women share much in common with their higher caste colleagues. This has no doubt contributed to a sense of solidarity between them which VMS has strengthened by offering them an alternate life-style and space to the hetero-patriarchal one. However, this *associational identity* has so far been inadequate in trumping the caste difference between them.

VMS's activist ex-untouchable women are proud of their new-found subjectivity as 'Dalit women activists'. But they also speak openly of their sense of inferiority in relation to their higher caste colleagues and critique the negative stereotypes they encounter in their work life. Their aspiration to capture political power too is motivated by their caste identity and social condition. They are still vulnerable to being victimized due to their subordination both to ex-untouchable men *and* to higher caste men and women at work and beyond work. Consequently, any argument about 'a post-Dalit future' (cf. Ciotti 2010a) is surely somewhat premature, when 'Dalit identity' itself is still a work in progress. Nonetheless, the differences *between* VMS's women activists and the ex-untouchable women they mobilise, on the one hand, and their differences *from* Ciotti's middle-class BSP women activists, on the other hand, indicate that we must urgently interrogate the assumed fixity and universality of Dalit

identity, and think of the political category of 'Dalit women' as being heterogeneous, dynamic and always open to revision (also see Ciotti, this volume).

REFERENCES

Anupamlata, Ramsheela, Reshma Ansari, Richa Nagar, Richa Singh, Shashi Vaish, Shashibala, Surbala and Vibha Bajpayee. 2006. *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism Through Seven Lives in India*. New Delhi: Zubaan.

Basu, Amrita and Srirupa Roy. 2004. 'Prose after Gujarat: violence, secularism and democracy in India', in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Will Secular India Survive?*, pp. 320-55, Gurgaon: ImprintOne.

Chandra, Kanchan. 2004. *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chakravarti, Uma. 2003. *Gendering Caste: Through A Feminist Lens*, Theorizing Feminism Series. Calcutta: Stree Publishers.

Chatterjee, Partha. 1998. 'Beyond the Nation? Or within?', *Social Text*, 56 (Autumn): 57-69.

Chatterjee, Partha. 2001. 'On civil and political societies in post-colonial democracies', in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (eds.), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, pp. 165-78, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chattopadhyay, Raghabendra and Esther Duflo. 2004. 'Impact of reservation in Panchayati Raj: evidence from a nation-wide randomised experiment', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39 (9): 979-986.

Ciotti, Manuela. 2006. 'At the margins of feminist politics? A comparative analysis of women in Dalit politics and Hindu Right organisations in northern India', *Contemporary South Asia*, 15 (4): 437-452.

Ciotti, Manuela. 2009. 'The Conditions of Politics: Low-Caste Women's Political Agency in Contemporary North Indian Society', *Feminist Review*, 91: 113-34.

Ciotti, Manuela. 2010a. 'Futurity in words: low-caste women politicians' self-representation and post-Dalit scenarios in north India', *Contemporary South Asia*, 18 (1): 43-56.

Ciotti, Manuela. 2010b. "'The Bourgeois Woman and the Half-Naked One": Or the Indian Nation's Contradictions Personified', *Modern Asian Studies*, 44 (4): 785-815.

Combahee River Collective. (1977) 2007. 'A Black Feminist Statement', in Estelle B. Freedman (ed.), *The Essential Feminist Reader*, pp. 325-330, New York: Modern Library.
Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 138-67.

Derrida, Jacques. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. Brighton: Harvester Press.

Deshpande, Ashwini. 2002. 'Assets versus autonomy? The changing face of the gender-caste overlap in India', *Feminist Economics*, 8 (2): 19-35.

Dietrich, Gabriele. 1992. *Reflections on the Women's Movement in India: Religion, Ecology, Development*. New Delhi: Horizon India Books.

Faludi, Susan. 1992. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Crown Publishing Company.

Gorringe, Hugo. 2005. *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Government of India. 2001. *Census of India*. New Delhi: Government of India.

Government of India. 2011. *Census of India*. New Delhi: Government of India.

Govinda, Radhika. 2008. 'Re-inventing Dalit Women's Identity? Dynamics of Social Activism and Electoral Politics in Rural North India', *Contemporary South Asia*, 16 (4): 427-40.

Govinda, Radhika. 2009. 'In the Name of 'Poor and Marginalised'? Politics of NGO Activism with Dalit Women in Rural North India', *Journal of South Asian Development*, 4 (1): 45-64.

Guru, Gopal. 1995. 'Dalit Women Talk Differently', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 (41-42): 2548-9.

hooks, bell. 1981. *Ain't I A Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. (ed.) 2003. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of Low Castes in North Indian Politics*. London: Hurst and Company.

Jaoul, Nicolas. 2007. 'Political and "non-political" means in the Dalit movement', in Sudha Pai (ed.), *Political Process in Uttar Pradesh: Identity, Economic Reforms and Governance*, pp. 191-220, New Delhi: Pearson Longman.

Jaoul, Nicolas. 2013. 'Politicizing victimhood: Dalit Panthers' response to caste violence in Uttar Pradesh in the early 1980s', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 11 (2): 169-79.

Kabeer, Naila with Ragui Assaad, Akosua Darkwah, Simeen Mahmud, Hania Sholkamy, Shakiba Tasneem and DZodzi Tsikata, and with statistical support by Munshi Sulaiman. 2013. *Paid work, women's empowerment and inclusive growth: transforming the structures of constraint*. New York: UN Women.

Kohli, Atul. 2001. *The Success of India's Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Krishna, Sankaran. 2011. 'Forgetting caste while living it: the privileges of amnesia', in D. Shyam Babu and Ravindra S. Khare (eds), *Caste In Life: Experiencing Inequalities*, pp. 7-19, New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley India Pvt. Ltd.

Lerche, Jens. 2008. 'Transnational advocacy networks and affirmative action for Dalits in India', *Development and Change*, 39 (2): 239-61.

McCall, Leslie. 2005. 'The complexity of intersectionality', *Signs*, 30 (3): 1771-1800.

Mendelsohn, Olivia and Marika Vicziany. 1998. *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Menon, Nivedita. 2004. *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Narayan, Badri. 2006. *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Nirantar. 1997. *Windows to the World: Developing a Curriculum for Rural Women*. New Delhi: Nirantar.

Pai, Sudha. 2002. *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Rao, Anupama. 2003. 'Caste, gender, and Indian feminism', in Anupama Rao (ed.), *Gender and Caste*, pp. 1-47, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Rege, Sharmila. 1998. 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: Towards a Critique of "Difference" and Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33 (44): WS39-46.

Sharma, Aradhana. 2006. 'Cross-breeding institutions, breeding struggle: women's empowerment, neoliberal governmentality and state (re)formation in India', *Cultural Anthropology*, 21 (1): 60-95.

Singh, D. K. 2010. 'The great UP hope', *The Indian Express*, May 3, http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-great-up-hope/ (accessed on 21 May 2014).

UNICEF (2011) Fact Sheet on Child Marriage, http://www.unicef.org/india/Child_Marriage_Fact_Sheet_Nov2011_final.pdf (accessed on 21 May 2014).

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2006. 'Intersectionality and Feminist Politics', *European Journal Of Women's Studies*, 13(3): 193-209.

List of acronyms used in the chapter**:**

BSP Bahujan Samaj Party

DAG Dynamic Action Group

DWA Dalit Women's Association

MS Mahila Samakhya

MSK Mahila Shikshan Kendra

SC Scheduled Caste(s)

UP Uttar Pradesh

VMS Vimukt Mahila Samuh

---

[1] According to Derrida (1982: 130-31), 'différance' refers to 'what in classical language would be called the origin or production of differences and the difference between differences, [that is,] the play of differences.'

[2] The term 'Dalit' is increasingly being used in popular media and scholarship as a synonym for the social category of 'ex-untouchable caste'. However, in this chapter, I have consciously used the term to refer to ex-untouchables' political identity. Maintaining this distinction between their caste identity and their political identity derived from their caste identity is crucial to the core arguments being made in this chapter.

[3] 'Caste', in English, describes both *'jati'*, meaning birth group and '*varna',* meaning 'class' in the sense of 'occupational category' (Deshpande 2002). According to the Hindu scriptures, the *varna* system involves four divisions: Brahmins (priests and spiritual preceptors), Kshatriyas (rulers, and warriors), Vaishyas (entrepreneurial groups) and Shudras (servile toilers). Those belonging to the *varna* system are 'caste-Hindus'. Untouchable castes (like Chamar and Jamadar who will be referred to subsequently in this chapter) are excluded altogether from this system.

[4] A list of all acronyms and their full forms is available at the end of the chapter.

[5] The women's and the organisation's names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

[6] Census data for 2001 and 2011 show that the majority of ex-untouchable men are *literate* and the majority of ex-untouchable women are *illiterate* in the state of UP.

[7] According to 2011 Census of India, Chamars have the largest population among the Scheduled Castes (SC) where VMS operates. Historically associated with leatherwork and carcass removal, they now work mostly as landless agricultural labourers.

[8] 'Communalism' is a specifically Indian usage describing conflict and dissension between religious communities, particularly Hindus and Muslims. It is important to note that there is a long history of Hindu fundamentalists trying to mobilise ex-untouchables as part of the pan-Hindu community, as foot soldiers in their project of creating a 'Hindu nation' at the expense of Muslims and other religious minorities (Basu and Roy 2004).

[9] All the employees from the dominant Hindu castes had been working at VMS since before the organisational review, whereas only a couple of ex-untouchables and practically no Muslims had worked there before then.

[10] The organisation did draw on Chamar men, and men and women from caste-Hindu and Muslim communities. However, they were fewer in number.

[11] Koris, who traditionally worked as weavers, are mostly landless labourers today, and are counted among the SCs in UP.

[12] Mahila Shikshan Kendra (MSK), literally Women's Learning Centres, were set up as part of Mahila Samakhya all over India to provide residential learning opportunities for girls and women who were otherwise denied education.
[13] There are very few Dalit organisations (and women's organisations) which devote themselves exclusively to mobilising ex-untouchable women in UP. Savitribai Phule Dalit Mahila Morcha set up in 2007 and having its base in Jaunpur district is one such organisation. It would be worth exploring how effective this organisation has been in its endeavour.
[14] While it was clear that VMS's Dalit women activists like Sonam considered ex-untouchable women's issues, including their experiences of gender-based violence, as distinct from those of ex-untouchable men, it was difficult to gauge whether they explicitly sought to establish a separate political identity from Dalit men activists. This is because the ex-untouchable men employed at VMS did office jobs rather than being directly involved in activism. Also, I did not get an opportunity to observe at close quarters VMS's Dalit women activists' interactions with Dalit men activists from DAG.
[15] Membership of DWA and VMS is through payment of a nominal fee.
[16] Inspired by Ambedkar's first name, Bheemrao, it is a form of greeting that politicized ex-untouchables use in northern India.
[17] The Phules, were not ex-untouchables themselves, but of Mali caste. They were radical nineteenth century social reformers, who struggled to educate lower caste women, including ex-untouchable women. Like Ambedkar, they were from Maharashtra, but they did not gain the mass following that he did. Yet VMS (like others) represented them as pan-Dalit reformers, in order to inspire and unite the ex-untouchable women it mobilised.
[18] It is clear to me that certain ex-untouchable women like Chuniya, whom VMS's employees had mobilised, had embraced the sense of collective identity as 'Dalit' women that VMS was trying to create. However, it is difficult to conclude how successful VMS has been in bringing about long lasting changes in the caste-based discrimination practised between the women from the various ex-untouchable (sub-)castes. This is because, though VMS had engaged with ex-untouchable women since its inception, when my fieldwork ended only a few years had passed since it had begun to focus on their 'Dalit' identity and on seeking to reduce the sharp divisions that existed between women from these ex-untouchable (sub-)castes.
[19] According to the 2001 Census of India, literacy rate for ex-untouchable males was 60.3% and for ex-untouchable females was 30.5% in UP. These figures have not significantly changed in the 2011 Census. The male kin of the illiterate ex-untouchable women with whom I came in contact were all literate. I am therefore unable to comment on whether and how the small percentage of *illiterate* ex-untouchable men have been politicised.
[20] Chuniya is referring to MSK where the women went to study. The MSK curriculum went beyond providing the women literacy, vocational training and functional information (on health, hygiene and government schemes, etc.). It sought to connect the women's personal experiences to an understanding of larger social realities, and adopted an integrated approach to teaching the sciences and the social sciences (see Nirantar 1997).
[21] Whilst in the case of some ex-untouchable women employees, pursuing further studies after joining VMS meant completing school education, in the case of other ex-untouchable women employees like Sunita, it meant acquiring one educational and/or vocational qualification after another, including a BEd degree.
[22] 'Dalit' and '*daridra*' (meaning poor/downtrodden) have the same origin. 'Daridranarayan' (God in the form of the poor) is, like 'Harijan', a Gandhian appellation for ex-untouchables. Sukhdaiya was probably more familiar with '*daridra*' and 'Daridranarayan', and so had confused 'Dalit' with '*Daridru*'.

[23] For the term 'Dalit' to become embedded in these illiterate ex-untouchable women's parlance, and for them to recognise their subjectivity as 'Dalit women' is likely to take much longer than it has taken VMS's educated ex-untouchable women employees. When my fieldwork ended, only a few years had passed since VMS had started fostering their subjectivity as 'Dalit women'. Chuniya's narrative shows how successful VMS has been.
[24] Jamadars are the lowest ex-untouchable caste, traditionally associated with 'scavenging' work – namely the carrying away and manual disposal of human excreta from the water-less 'dry toilets' of the wealthier castes. Very importantly, within these castes, the extremely unpleasant 'scavenging' tasks are carried out solely by the *women*, not the men.
[25] I have discussed elsewhere (Govinda 2009; 2013) how, unlike many women's NGOs where activism is no more than a '9 to 5' job (Menon 2004), VMS has consciously struggled to cultivate among its employees a genuine commitment to the principles it stands for. Rani's narrative above illustrates how VMS's ex-untouchable women employees seek to embrace their 'Dalit' identity in their personal lives and how, in spite of their genuine commitment, this is rarely a straightforward process.
[26] Some were single mothers, others had violent, alcoholic husbands who did not contribute (adequately) to the household expenses.
[27] Yadavs are a middle caste, traditionally involved in cattle-rearing. They tend to constitute the dominant caste in the villages where VMS operates. They are classed as an Other Backward Class (OBC) in UP, and therefore benefit from the Indian state's affirmative action policies.
[28] It ran a restaurant at meal times and also offered a tiffin delivery system to local offices.
[29] Some ex-untouchable and higher caste women employees also aspired to become government school teachers and health workers as government jobs provided retirement benefits which NGO employment lacked.
[30] All Indian NGOs interested in receiving foreign funding need to register under the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA).
[31] VMS is like any other externally-funded NGO which is required to maintain a non-party political stance. Strategically, it aligns itself with the BSP but it has steered clear of permanent association with any political party (Govinda 2008). This position may have influenced its ex-untouchable women employees' choice of contesting without political party backing. It is this choice which sets these women apart from most other candidates – *including* ex-untouchable women – who seem to be increasingly contesting for panchayat elections with support from one or the other political party.